DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 257 007 CG 018 229

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TITLE A Custody Evaluation Model for Pre-School Children.
PUB DATE Aug 84
NOTE 45p.; Paper presented at the Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association (92nd, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, August 24-28, 1984).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Child Custody; Child Development; Child Welfare; *Consultants; *Decision Making; Divorce; Employed Parents; Evaluation Methods; Infants; *Models; One Parent Family; Parent Child Relationship; Parenting Skills; *Preschool Children
IDENTIFIERS *Mental Health Workers

ABSTRACT

This document addresses the needs of mental health consultants involved in decision-making in custody disputes. A psycho-ecological model for assessing contexts of development in cases involving preschool children is presented, and the theoretical basis and rationale for the model are discussed. Issues, instruments, and findings of recent empirical developmental research are reviewed and incorporated into the theoretical framework of the practice model. In an outline of the model, the life space of the child is divided into three areas: settings and relationships that directly involve the developing child (microsystem); communication pathways between settings of the microsystem (mesosystem); and settings and social factors that indirectly influence development (exosystem). Parent-child relationships, and home and alternative child care settings within the microsystem are examined, and Erikson's developmental stages within these settings are discussed. Critical assessment issues are presented, and assessment methods for each of these issues are suggested. Issues such as attachment versus competence, identification of the principal parent, authoritative parenting, parent-child communication, and parent role models are considered. The effects of income loss and maternal employment are examined, and networks of support are discussed. A seven-page bibliography is appended. (NRB)

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A CUSTODY EVALUATION MODEL FOR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN

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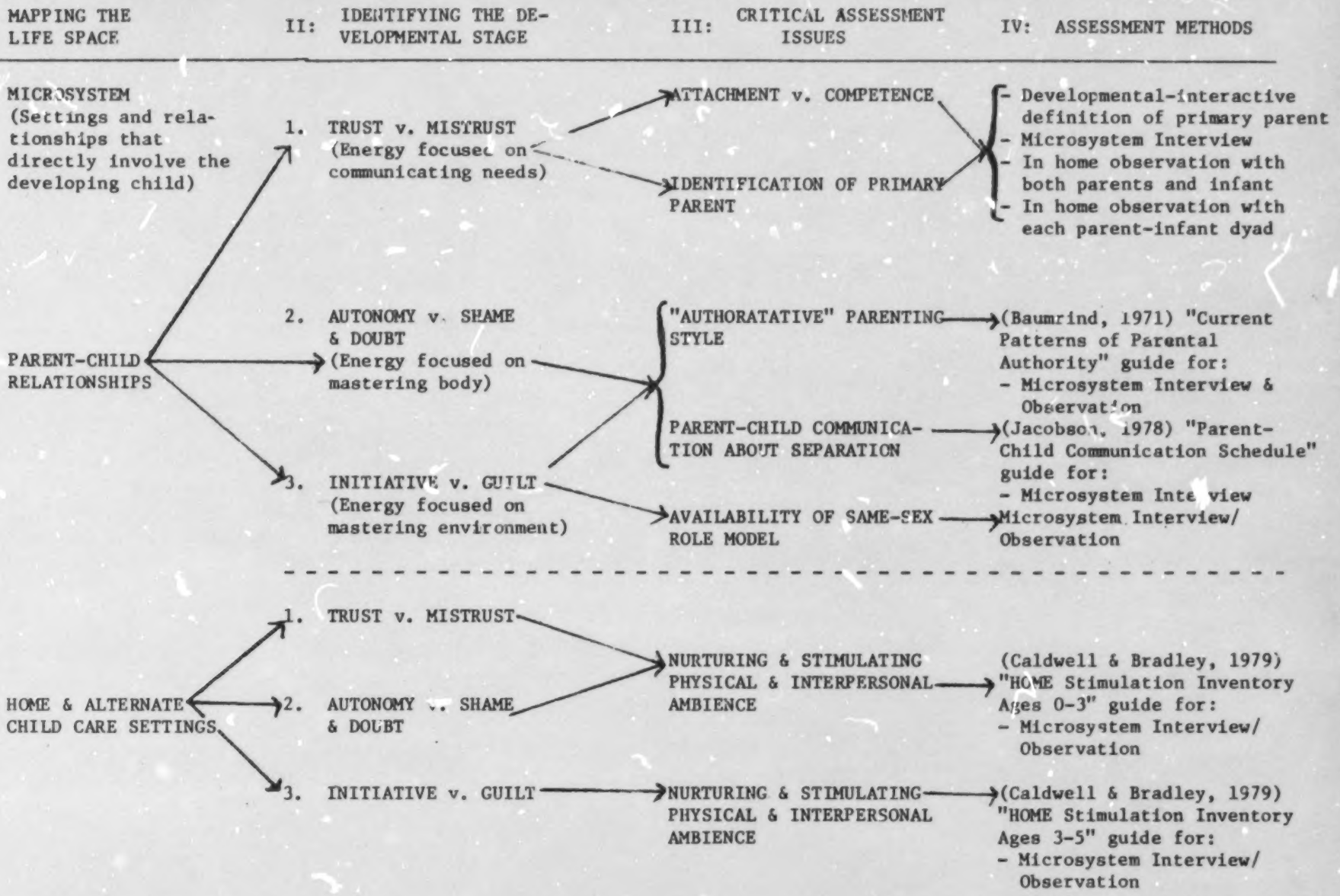
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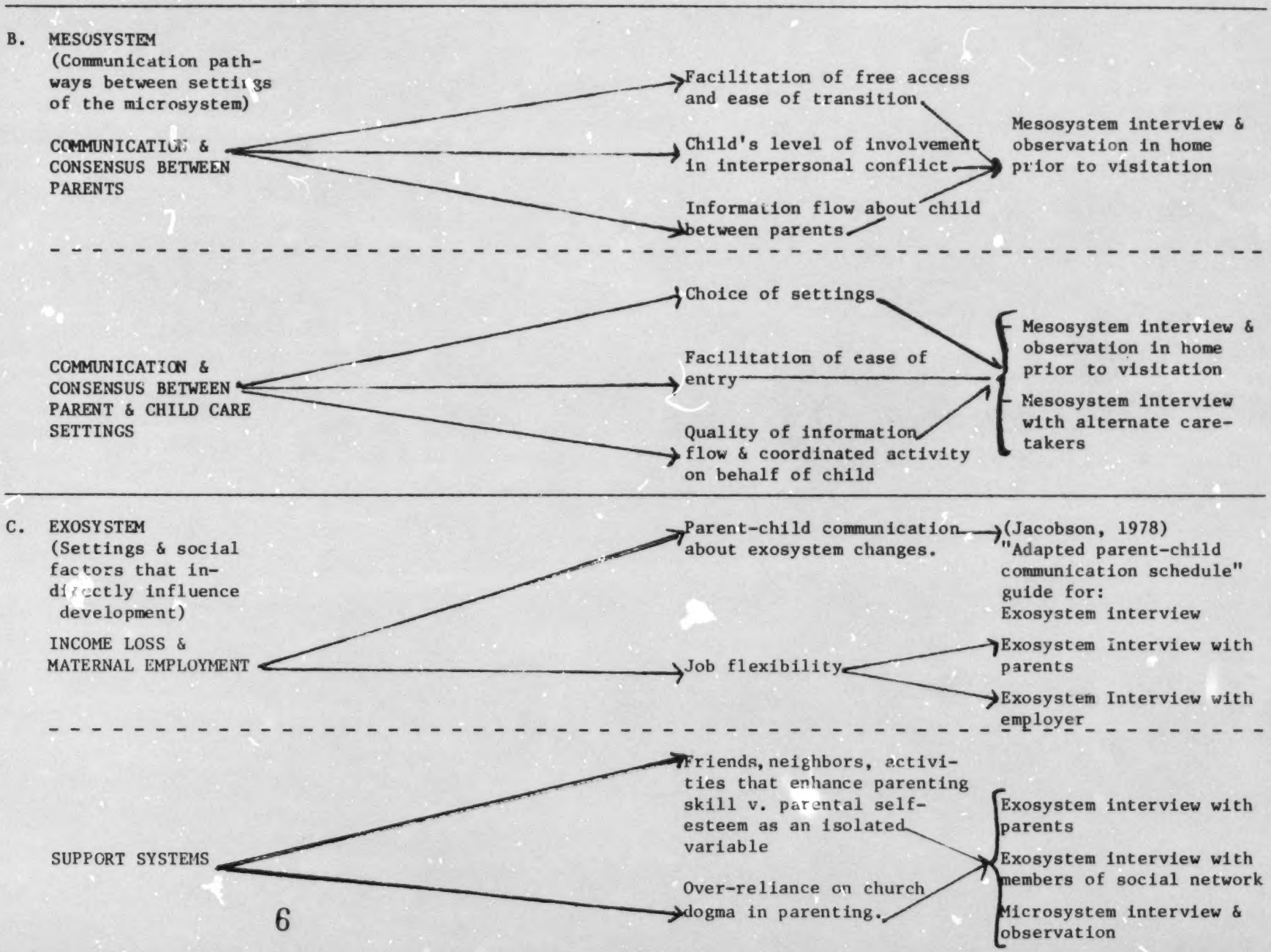
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When divorcing parents cannot agree on the custody of young children, case law precedent traditionally dictated that, under normal circumstances, the custody of a child of "tender years" be awarded to the mother (Alexander, 1977; Benedek & Benedek, 1972; Ploscowe, Foster, & Freed, 1972; Robbins, 1974; Slovenko, 1973). However, as the "best interests" of the child has become an increasingly accepted criterion, the legal system has called upon behavioral scientists to provide an academic and clinical data base for the determination of placement (Derdeyn, 1975; Jenkins, 1977; McDermott, Tseng, Char, & Fukunaga, 1978; Musetto, 1978).

Unfortunately, the mental health professional rarely has specific training or access to a systematic body of knowledge to guide him or her in this difficult task. Historically, mental health practice with parents and children has been limited to therapeutic intervention in which therapist and family cooperate. Custody disputes on the other hand, represent competing contexts of development that must be evaluated comparatively. In cases involving pre-school children the difficulties are exarcerbated by the child's developmental status. A young child's pre-operational egocentrism naturally limits cognitive perspective to his or her immediate experience. In consequence, the child's own wishes regarding placement tend to spring from the moment, and cannot be regarded as stable indicators. In addition a pre-school age child's dependence upon one or both parents for the majority of care results in a paucity of objective information.

In spite of these difficulties and the continuing call for academic and clinical direction in consultation, behavioral science has been slow to respond. McDermott, McGuire, and Berner (1976) reported a survey of

training programs that revealed virtually no training or didactic experience in this critical area. Woody (1977b) concurred, stating that academic knowledge in child custody in general, and practical familiarity with the workings of the legal system in specific is not part of counselor training programs regardless of disciplinary alignment.

Yet the consultant who wishes to have an intelligent impact upon the outcome of a custody dispute must be prepared to develop an objective recommendation that is academically substantive enough to survive rebuttal in the adverserial ambiance of a custody dispute.

This article addresses the largely unmet needs of mental health consultants in search of defensible academic criteria as an alternative to the tired tradition of automatic maternal custody. A psycho-ecological model for assessing contexts of development in cases involving pre-school children will be presented and the theoretical basis and rationale for the model will be discussed. Issues, instruments and findings of recent empirical developmental research will be reviewed and incorporated into the theoretical framework of the practice model.

MAPPING AN ASSESSMENT PLAN

The quality of the parent-child relationship post divorce is widely reported to be the most critical variable affecting the pre-school child's developmental equilibrium (Gardner, 1977; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Rosenthal, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975). The quality of this relationship is the obvious focus of any custody study. Less obvious is the complexity of evaluating a relationship that has recently been carved out of an established family structure in an atmosphere of environmental and emotional disequilibrium.

Isolated measures of the child's post-divorce adjustment or the parents' general level of competence as adults do not adequately address the complexity of a changing system in a changing environment. The parent's level of adjustment must be evaluated in terms of how it impinges upon his or her functioning in relation to the child. In addition, the consultant must evaluate each parent's ability to mediate the effects of the inevitable environmental changes on the parent-child relationship. Similarly, the childs' level of adjustment must be evaluated in terms of how it is affected by interaction with each parent.

Bronfenbrenner (1977) developed an interactive model of the developing child's life space that is particularly useful as an organizing framework for a custody assessment for several reasons: 1) the model organizes the child's life space into contexts of development, 2) each region of the model is conceptualized in terms of the child's direct experience and potential effect upon development, 3) the model conceptualizes influences upon development in terms of interactions, 4) the model is broad enough to include the multiplicity of environmental changes that accompany divorce.

The model is organized into three nested spheres of environmental influence ranging from most to least directly experienced by the developing child. The central sphere is the microsystem or settings and relationships that involve the developing child. The microsystem is nested within the mesosystem, or patterns of communication between the elements of the microsystem. The mesosystem is nested within the exosystem, which is composed of settings or social factors that influence the child indirectly.

To establish an individualized plan of assessment according to Bronfenbrenner's conceptual framework, the consultant must map out a model of the settings and relationships that are salient in each of the three spheres of the life space of the particular child in question. This

mapping procedure protects the consultant from prematurely focusing on provocative issues raised in a litigious atmosphere. The information can be obtained and the rationale communicated in initial interviews with each Parent. At the very outset the consultant has communicated the intent to establish a neutral data base that is specifically related to issues of development as he or she understands them.

The consultant begins by identifying all of the settings and relationships that compose the child's microsystem. For purposes of a custody assessment involving a young child, the most crucial element is each parent-child relationship and its context. Supplementary information can be obtained from an evaluation of other settings provided for the child when in the care of each parent, such as professional child care or the homes of friends and relatives.

The second step in the consultant's planning is a mapping of the communication pathways between all primary settings provided for the child by each parent. For example, divorce frequently precipitates the need for one parent to work for the first time, necessitating out of home child care. The child's microsystem expands, now containing at least two primary settings and, if the child spends time in both parental homes, the child's microsystem may be composed of three or more contexts. The mesosystem is defined as the system of communication pathways between all these settings. According to the research upon which Bronfenbrenner's model is based, the quality and degree of this contact between settings can profoundly influence development and must be carefully assessed.

Identification of the particular settings and social factors of the exosystem, or least directly experienced region of potential influence, is the last step in the mapping procedure. In the example of the young child requiring out-of-home child care, the characteristics and requirements of the parent's new work place can indirectly affect development even though

the child does not participate in that setting. For example, the working hours required may affect not only the quality of the parent-child relationship, but the number and tone of all contexts in which the child now participates. The settings and factors of the exosystem may include the work place, level of income, social contacts, support networks and intimate relationships that directly involve the parent and may indirectly affect the child.

IDENTIFYING THE SALIENT DEVELOPMENTAL TASKS

In order to evaluate the salient settings and relationships of an assessment plan, the consultant must determine what developmental tasks the child in question is attempting to master with the help or hindrance of the environment. As Woody (1977a) advocates, Erikson's stage theory of psychosexual development provides a useful basis for this determination.

To establish the developmental stage of children under age five or six, the consultant is best served by systematic observation and recording of the activities and verbalizations in which child spontaneously engages. Interviews with parents, pre-school teachers, babysitters and other primary caretakers can provide substantiation of the child's central developmental issues, and information regarding any divorce-related regressions.

It is critical to establish the child's developmental achievements at this stage of the assessment for several reasons. First, as indicated by Bronfenbrenner's interactive model, the behavior of the child in the presence of each parent is as indicative of parental competence as is the behavior of the parent. Microsystem settings that elicit the child's maximal developmental achievements suggest a more productive parent-child interaction than settings that elicit regressive behavior. Secondly, knowledge of divorce related regressions can be useful in interpreting

and classifying the source of any symptomatic behavior observed in the child in the presence of either parent. Thirdly, interviews with parents concerning the child's developmental status and possible regressions are useful in assessing each parents' awareness of and responsiveness to the child as an individual. Finally, sensitive use of the instruments recommended for use in this assessment model requires an awareness of the child's developmental capacities.

Erikson's (1950, 1963) developmental stages are characterized as a sequence of polarized issues that become salient as the child matures physically and psychologically. The central concern at each stage demands a significant concentration of mental energy and attention as the child struggles toward resolution. Therefore, the tasks upon which the child focuses his mental and physical energy should define the child's developmental stage. The opposites that characterize each stage suggst the consequences of ego failure on the one hand and successful maturation on the other.

Successful mastery of each developmental task is accomplished by, and contributes to ego strength. Ego is defined as a sense of self, and ego strength as the relative ability of each child to adopt a set of behaviors and attitudes that allow for increasingly complex growth without undue anxiety. Regression to an earlier stage, or premature movement to the next (leaving unresolved issues behind) are both possible ways that the ego manages failure to find a comfortable pattern of growth.

The first task of life is to establish trust in the environment as well as in onself. A positive resolution depends upon the establishment of a predictable rhythm between infant and caregiver in which the child is able to communicate his or her needs, and trust that they will be interpreted and met in a consistent and nurturing fashion. This stage, lasting from birth until approximately 18 months is labeled trust vs. mistrust.

In Erikson's second developmental stage the child focuses on mastery of the body and its functions. For assessment purposes the child can be considered to have embarked upon this stage when the attention focuses away from fulfilling dependency needs and toward experimentation with meeting those needs autonomously. For example, the child may become actively involved in the struggle to control the food and the mechanics of mealtimes. As the child experiments with increasing physical maturation, a pleasurable sense of autonomy may develop from learning to control bladder and bowels, to walk unaided and to speak. Such healthy gains are possible for the child when parental supervision simultaneously protects from embarrassing or painful failure while encouraging new efforts. The child who emerges from this stage with a sense of self-control will develop a lasting sense of self-esteem, whereas loss of self-control and external overcontrol will produce a lifelong tendency toward shame and doubt.

The third developmental stage lasts from approximately 3 to 5 years. For purposes of a developmental assessment the child can be considered to have transitioned into this third stage when he or she no longer expends energy or attention on conquering the maturational processes of the body. Instead the child can be observed to have a surplus of energy with which to explore and attach to objects in the surrounding environment. At this stage the child is an autonomous and mobile entity, interacting with the physical environment on equal terms. In psychosexual terms, the child at this stage is developing initiative toward mastery of people and objects while pleasure is derived from the genital zone. As the child progresses through this stage he or she becomes divided within, afraid of newly felt impulses, and enraged that they cannot be satisfied. The development of healthy initiative depends upon the child's ability to accept alternative forms of mastery offered by a parent who can enforce clear and rational

limits. The availability of a same-sex parent or significant other with whom the child can comfortably identify is an additional factor in the child's successful resolution of this critical stage.

EVALUATING THE SETTINGS OF THE MICROSYSTEM FOR INFANTS IN TRUST VS. MISTRUST

Issues of attachment versus competence. When the case in question involves an infant in the trust versus mistrust stage of development (approximately 0-18 months) developmental literature traditionally suggests that there is a biological bond between mother and infant that cannot be disturbed without causing depression and possible failure to thrive (A. Freud, 1960; Heinicke, 1956; Heinicke & Westheimer, 1965). The reported consequences of maternal deprivation may appear to be a straightforward directive to recommend for maternal custody for infants. The issues, however, are not straightforward.

Close examination of early research on maternal deprivation (Shirley & Poyntz, 1941; Shirley, 1942; Schaffer, 1958; Robertson & Bowlby, 1952) shows that institutionalization, hospitalization and placement in day care were equated with separation from the mother because the researchers assumed that mothers were primary caretakers prior to separation. Reported outcomes were therefore attributed to loss of care, presumably, but not demonstrably, from the mother. In consequence, separation from the primary caretaker and separation from the mother became undifferentiated.

There is a peculiar circularity in this line of research. The study questions and designs are fraught with assumptions about the unique significance of maternal care, and consequently focus solely on mother-infant interactions and the effects of separations. In turn, the findings

reinforce the belief that loss of maternal care, the only type of primary care studied, is the critical factor in healthy infant development. As Lamb (1977) noted, the net result is that the social beliefs of research scientists have been elevated to the status of uncontestable biological fact. Recent studies that have addressed the significance of infant attachment to both parents indicate that mothers and fathers are equally affectionate in their interaction with newborn infants, and equally sensitive to infant cues during feeding sessions (Parke & O'Leary, 1975; Parke & Sawin, 1976). Lamb's observational studies of infant-father, infant-mother interaction over the first two years of life have demonstrated that infants are attached to both their mother and fathers from the time they are first able to form relationships (1976a, 1977a, 1977b, 1977c).

Clearly what is of principal importance in evaluating the issue of attachment in infants is that: Infants may be capable of attachment to both parents; that the primary attachment figure may be, but is not necessarily, the mother; and that the primary attachment figure and the parent most competent to meet the child's future developmental needs is not necessarily one and the same. One fact alone emerges with clarity from the literature; that infants throughout the trust mistrust stage of development require a continuous pattern of predictable care provided in an appropriately stimulating environment. The consultant must, therefore, determine without prior presumptions on the basis of gender, which parent has been, is and can continue to be the most effective primary caregiver.

Identifying the Primary Parent

Bronfenbrenner (1979) concludes that development is facilitated when children participate in progressively more complex activities with someone with whom they have developed a strong, enduring attachment in a reciprocal relationship. This suggests a developmental, interactive definition as a

primary parent that encompasses issues of attachment as well as competence. The primary parent is one who a) has adapted his or her behavior to the child's changing developmental needs over time, b) can recount the child's developmental changes that required reciprocal changes in parenting, and c) can identify current and future needs and respond appropriately. The first two skills are the historical foundation of an enduring emotional attachment, and make the third skill possible in the observable present. This definition suggests interview questions that focus on parental awareness of and responsiveness to infant growth and development. For example, can the parent recount changes in the child's developmental accomplishments? At what point in this first developmental stage did the infant begin to sleep through the night? What effect, if any, did this have on each parent? When did the child begin to crawl? To walk? Was the home environment "babyproofed" at some point, and if so, by whom? Can the parent identify the infants' particular likes and dislikes? Eating and sleeping schedules? Was the child breast fed? The mother who has been or is currently breast feeding is an inevitable source of need satisfaction to the infant and, in most cases, that chosen biological task will translate into a profound responsiveness to her infants' needs that must be carefully considered. Finally, can the parent anticipate developmental changes and articulate a clear orientation and plan for responding to them?

This type of information should be readily available to the primary parent. These developmental details should also be difficult to falsify unless the interviewee has prepared in advance and is exceptionally knowledgeable about developmental theory. It is anticipated, therefore, that this definition, used by a sensitive clinician, would circumvent some of the misinformation and defensiveness that inevitably characterizes parent interviews in contested custody cases.

Additional issues that require more clinical insight by the interviewer include: How the parent views him or herself, and is expected to be viewed by others in the role of caregiver to an infant. Whether the parent communicates to the consultant pride and satisfaction in the activities and requirements of the performance of that role, or simply in winning time away from the rival spouse. Vindictiveness, and the need for self-justification are possible motives in any custody dispute, and must be carefully assessed regardless of the age of the child (Musetto, 1978).

Evaluating Specific Environmental Factors in the Microsystem

Observation of the parent-child relationship in the home setting is a crucial component of the microsystem assessment. Baumrind and Black (1967) recommend the time span from shortly before the dinner hour until just after the child's bed time, as a period commonly known to produce a wide range of critical interaction under maximum stress. In the first observation the consultant should attempt to include both parents in one home setting with the infant. As Lamb's (1976a, 1976c) research suggests, the infant is likely to turn to the primary parent when stressed, and the first introduction of the consultant into the home can be regarded as a stressor event. Under such conditions, the consultant can determine: Which parent most easily comforts the young infant? Which parent is able to interpret and differentiate types of crying and respond effectively and appropriately? Which parent does the older infant approach when needing assistance or comfort? Which parent can interpret the child's early speaking efforts? This first observation can serve to habituate the infant to the consultant so that a second observation of each parent alone with the infant is less confounded by stress.

For purposes of the second in-home observation, the consultant may be well served by the HOME Stimulation Inventory for Infants Birth - Three Years, developed by Caldwell and Bradley (1979) in recognition of the widely reported correlation between environmental quality and infants' developmental status (Elardo, Bradley, & Caldwell, 1975; Jones, 1972; Marjoribanks, 1972; McCall, Applebaum, & Hogarty, 1973). The HOME was designed to be a culture free measure of the young child's early developmental environment. The instrument is a clinical screening tool containing items that focus on the child's opportunities for stimulation and nuturance in the parent-child interaction and in the physical environment. It is specifically designed for home observation and parent interview. In cases where the infant resides in only one parental home, the parent-child interaction items can be evaluated in the infants' home with the non-resident parent. Items that measure physical characteristics of the developmental context provided by the parent can be evaluated by interview questions described in the manual. Validation studies of the HOME showed significant correlations with a variety of standardized measures of developmental status (Caldwell & Bradley, 1979). The authors' carefully operationalized directions for observation and interview, and adequately documented psychometric properties of the inventory make it uniquely suited to the consultant's task.

As the Eriksonian polarity suggests, the infant in the stage of trust versus mistrust is exploring his or her own trustworthiness and that of the environment. The infant's earliest experience, therefore, should be a predictable continuity of responsiveness care from a parent and/or appropriate substitutes who can interpret, respond, nurture and stimulate. The older infant has additional requirements for predictability and protection without the loss of stimulation and the opportunity for exploration. Only

careful observation of the settings of the microsystem over adequate periods of time can ascertain and effectively substantiate the availability of these experiences for the infant when in the care of each parent.

EVALUATING THE SETTINGS OF THE MICROSYSTEM FOR CHILDREN IN ERIKSON'S SECOND AND THIRD DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Most research findings and available clinical instruments that relate specifically to the assessment of older pre-school children do not differentiate Erikson's second and third developmental stages. In consequence, the information presented here refers to both stages since it necessarily reflects the work of other behavioral scientists. However, when the child's developmental stage so clearly interacts with his or her short and long term adjustment, as it does in the event of parental separation, it is crucial for the consultant to distinguish the developmental issues of children in Autonomy vs. Shame and Doubt from those who are vulnerable to issues of Initiative vs. Guilt.

In cases involving older pre-schoolers in both developmental stages the focal issues in the parent-child relationship increase in number and complexity. As the child moves away from passive dependency toward autonomy and initiative, parental competence increasingly depends on the achievement of a balance between protective holding on and developmentally-enhancing letting go. The necessary balance experienced in the outer world reflect the struggle for the ego strength that Erikson defined as the relative ability of each child to adopt a set of behaviors and attitudes that allow for increasingly complex growth without undue anxiety (Erikson, 1950, 1963). Anxiety, in Eriksonian theory, is generated by irrational and sometimes frightening impulses felt with more or less

intensity at different ages and stages. Anxiety can also be generated by the sometimes equally irrational and punishing compulsions of the super ego that are felt in response to impulse. Depending on the child's salient developmental issues the consultant must assess the relative availability of a degree of environmental control and support that will protect the child from irrational internal impulses and failure in his or her developmental efforts. Simultaneously, the consultant must look for dogmatic or impulsive parenting practices that "over-control" the child. Both irrationally autocratic and overly permissive parenting styles can generate anxiety that constrains development. In a similar vein Bronfenbrenner (1979) prescribes a gradual shift of the balance of power from the parent or caretaker in favor of the child as he or she becomes increasingly efficient and self-sustaining.

Baumrind and Black (1967) studied the effects of authoritarian (highly dogmatic and over-controlling) permissive (laisez faire) and authoritative parenting on pre-school children reporting that parents of the children who were most self-reliant, self-controlled, explorative and content were themselves controlling and demanding, but were also warm, rational, and receptive to the child's communication. This unique combination of high control and positive encouragement of the child's autonomous and independent striving was called "authoritative" parenting behavior.

In a study of children in same-sex custody placement, Santrock and Warshak (1979) classified observed parental behavior according to Baumrind's categories and concluded that "authoritative" parenting appears to produce positive outcomes on measures of social competence for children under mother and father custody arrangements, and, therefore represents a more effective parenting style.

Measures of Authoritative Parenting

Baumrind (1971) published 75 items that were used in her study of patterns of parental authority. The items were grouped into 15 areas of measurement designed to assess the child's experience of control and autonomy in areas ranging from expected participation in household choices to the clarity of parental views and the manner in which they are communicated and enforced. Twelve of the fifteen measurement areas describe parental behaviors that are appropriate for evaluating cases involving children from eighteen months to five years. In the remaining three the specific developmental stage and achievements of the pre-school child, established earlier in the assessment procedure, must be taken into account.

Baumrind, et al., used the instrument for home observation during the pre-dinner to bedtime span. Clearly, the instrument could be adapted for home observation and interview in custody assessments.

In a 1978 study of custody evaluation procedures, McDermott, et al., noted that home observations were problematic for custody consultants, generating stress and anxiety in both parents and children. From the perspective of these researchers the custody evaluation is better conducted under laboratory conditions. For this purpose McDermott (1978) and his colleagues developed a Parent-Child Interaction Test that is based on Baumrind's descriptors of parental behaviors. The PCIT is designed to evaluate interactions observed as each parent and child work together to tell stories about a set of Children's Apperception Test (CAT) cards in a videotaped lab setting. As of this writing, the PCIT has not been validated as a standard test (McDermott, 1983). However, McDermott's initiative suggests that it is possible for consultant's to develop similar measurement instruments, based on Baumrind's published work, that could

legitimately be used as one clinical index in an array of assessment data. In addition, McDermott's in-lab, videotaped measurement of structured interactions may provide an alternative approach for consultants who prefer not to use home observation, or may be used to provide supplementary assessment and additional opportunities for feedback from other mental health professionals.

Measures of Parent-Child Communication About the Separation

An assessment area that is specific to divorcing parents and their children is the quality of parent-child communication about the reasons for the separation and its implications for the future. This issue is particularly salient for pre-school children whose cognitive style naturally leads them to believe that external events (i.e., a parent's absence) are caused by their thoughts (Piaget, 1972). This cognitive egocentrism tends to be excarcerbated by the young child's need for a sense of control that a self-blaming fantasy uncomfortably provides (Gardner, 1970). Consequently, pre-schoolers, by virtue of their cognitive developmental stage and need for a sense of control and understanding, are likely to construct self-critical, anxiety provoking fantasies about why the separation occurred, what their role was in it, and what may come in the future. Clearly, the introduction of a realistic, comprehensible explanation is crucial to the adjustment of the pre-school child.

Unfortunately, this problem frequently goes unrecognized. The literature consistently reports that parents consider their pre-school children too young to be told, producing confusion, anxiety, and fantasies of self-blame and reconciliation (Gardner, 1977; Grossberg & Crandall, 1978; Kurdek & Siesky, 1979; Rosenthal, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975).

In a study of the relationship between parent-child communication about the separation and children's adjustment, Jacobson (1978) reported that children with whom the parent had discussed the separation at a level commensurate with their developmental capacities, were significantly less anxious and more mature. Jacobson's eight-item parent-child communication schedule (1978) used in conjunction with previously established knowledge of the child's developmental capabilities, can serve to assess the parents' awareness of and responsiveness to the specific informational needs of pre-schoolers adjusting to parental separation.

Measures of Home Stimulation

The home environment of children in Erikson's second developmental stage, autonomy vs. shame and doubt, can be evaluated according to the criteria of Caldwell and Bradley's HOME Stimulation Inventory for Infants from Birth to Three Years (1979). Sensitive use of an instrument that spans two major developmental periods requires that careful attention be paid to the observed developmental status of the child in question.

Caldwell and Bradley's HOME Stimulation Inventory for Pre-School Children Age Three to Five (1979) is more suited to the evaluation of home environments of children who have advanced to Erikson's third developmental stage. The achievement of this stage does not necessarily correspond with the ages designated. The consultant's early determination of the child's developmental status by observation is therefore critical for determining the most appropriate instrument.

As in the HOME for Infants, the authors provide clearly operationalized directions and documentation of the tests' psychometric properties.

Evaluating Issues Regarding the Oedipal Conflict

Children in Erikson's third developmental stage, Initiative vs. Guilt (corresponding to Freud's Oedipal stage) require maximum opportunity to master objects and relationships within limits that are rational and predictable. In psychosexual terms, the child's initial drive is towards ownership and control of the affectional resources of the opposite sex parent. The resolution of this conflict evolves as the child gives up this futile campaign and redirects psychic energy toward identification with the same-sex parent.

It has been argued that a boy in this stage is particularly vulnerable when a divorce occurs, traditionally leaving him in his mother's custody. The literature reflects three major areas of concern. Most simply that the boy will lack a significant male with whom to identify, resulting in inadequate sex role resolution (Biller, 1969; Rosenberg & Sutton-Smith, 1971; Santrock, 1970). Secondly, that a boy will experience loss of self-esteem and anxiety due to the guilt he feels about the actualization of his wish for his father's absence (McDermott, 1970; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975). Loss of self-esteem may also occur when the boy identifies with a father who is devalued by the mother (Grossberg & Crandall, 1978; Herzog & Sudia, 1973; Mahler & Rabinovitch, 1956). Thirdly, there is a concern that the boys' relationship with the remaining female parent is typically ridden with anxiety and conflict (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; McDermott, 1970; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

These concerns have led to a previously untouched area of investigation: the merits of same-sex custody for children of divorce. Santrock and Warshak (1979) studied boys and girls who were between three and eight at separation, and found that boys in father custody and girls in mother custody showed better over-all adjustment than children in the custody of

an opposite sex parent. Conversely, in a study of boys who were older at separation (8-13) Lowenstein and Koopman (1979) found no effect of gender of the custodial parent on self-esteem in boys.

These very preliminary conclusions may well suggest a guideline that children in this stage of development benefit from same-sex placement, particularly in cases where both parents have been evaluated as equally competent. Empirical investigation, however, is just beginning. At present, the consultant is best served by an awareness of the flaws of the presumption of maternal custody, and the needs of the child to have free access to a same-sex parent or substitute whom he or she is psychologically free to like, respect and identify with. As Santrock and Warshak (1979) ultimately conclude, the third stage child's paramount need, like that of younger children, is for a mutually positive relationship with an "authoritative" parent in an appropriately stimulating environment.

EVALUATING THE MESOSYSTEM OR COMMUNICATION PATHWAYS BETWEEN SETTINGS

The second area of the consultant's assessment map is the mesosystem, or system of communication pathways between primary settings in each of the contexts provided for the developing child. For pre-school children, the critical links are usually between both parental homes, pre-school and other child care settings. According to Bronfenbrenner, the developmental impact of the mesosystem on young children depends upon the quality of communication, the consensus of goals and values and the child's ease of transition between caretakers and settings of the mesosystem network.

Communications and Consensus Between Parents

For purposes of a custody evaluation involving young children, the critical communication system is often between the two primary microsystem

settings, the parental homes. The communication, consensus and quality of the child's transition between the households of divorcing parents is cited as a correlate of children's post divorce adjustment almost as frequently as the parent-child relationship (Berg & Kelly, 1979; Hess & Camara, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Rosen, 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

It seems wise for the consultant to pre-suppose that the severed marital relationship and custody dispute have generated profound disagreement and animosity between the parents. However, in an evaluation of this mesosystem link, it is the child's experience of and involvement in the conflict that is at issue. The consultant must determine each parent's willingness and ability to compartmentalize animosity and mediate its effects upon the child. These qualities of the inter-parent mesosystem can be determined in terms of the child experience, that is, by whether he or she is exposed to or protected from conflict; experiences consistency or inconsistency in parenting, anxiety or comfort in transitioning between settings, and prohibition or freedom from one parent to relate to the other. The child's transition between home settings can shed light on many of these issues.

Recent studies suggest that access to both parents can facilitate children's adjustment. However, researchers have also noted that there is strong potential for anxiety and regression in young children when they move between conflicting parents. As Hetherington, Cox and Cox (1978) noted in their study of 2-4 year olds and their custodial mothers, "When there was disagreement and inconsistency in attitudes toward the child, conflict and ill will between divorced parents, or when the father was poorly adjusted, frequent visitation was associated with poor mother-child functioning and disruption in the child's behavior". Other studies of preschool children support Hetherington's caveat, suggesting that the value

of transitioning between parents is determined by the quality of communication and consensus in the parental relationship as much as by mutuality in the parent-child relationship (Jacobson, 1978, III; Kurdek, 1981; McDermott, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975). Research evidence regarding the child's perspective, suggests that children do want frequent interaction with both parents (Nolan, 1977; Rosen, 1977; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). Wallerstein and Kelly (1975) report that younger children in particular were dissatisfied with the paucity of contact with the non-resident parent.

The importance of access to both parents, uncompromised by conflict and ill will, is clearly demonstrated. In the mesosystem interview it is critical for the consultant to evaluate whether one or both parents are deliberately limiting access and, if so, for what reasons. A review of the findings of the preceding microsystem evaluation should help the consultant to determine whether the motivation to limit access is based upon realistic concerns or to harass the other parent at the child's expense.

Similarly, the consultant must evaluate each parent's willingness to facilitate transition that is relatively free of anxiety by preparing the child and the other parent for visitation. As Bronfenbrenner (1979) notes "Development is enhanced to the extent that, prior to each entry into a new setting, the child and members of both settings involved are provided with information, advice and experience relevant to the impending transition." For example, does the parent help the young child to anticipate the timing of the transition? Is he or she sufficiently aware of the pre-school aged child's poorly developed temporal perspective to use concrete determinants of time, such as marking a calendar, or has the parent used abstract verbal terms? The phrase "every other weekend" for example, is a common source of mystery to pre-school children with divorced parents. Does the parent willingly communicate with the other parent, providing relevant information regarding the child and the particulars of transition?

The mesosystem interview also covers less straightforward issues that require the consultant's clinical skill and insight. For example, how aware is each parent of the impact of conflict upon the child? Is the parent able to rationally evaluate the potential outcome of continued dissension, diffusing conflict when possible? Is the parent able to compartmentalize hostility and anger as a spouse so that it does not affect functioning as a parent? Does the parent consciously attempt to support similar expectations of the child's conduct in both settings, regardless of spousal conflict? Does he or she attempt to inform the other parent of new developments, behavioral changes and other issues that would contribute to the child's experience of constancy? Does the parent avoid enlisting the child as an ally when in conflict with the other parent?

Observation in the home prior to transition can provide additional opportunity to evaluate the above interview material and each parent's willingness to release the child physically and psychologically into the care of the other parent. How does the parent refer to the child's other parent; is the discussion of complaints and concerns appropriately limited when the child is present? Is the parent able to encourage the child to go and visit or does the parent communicate anxiety at the child's departure, impeding his or her ability to individuate from one parent and to derive satisfaction from a relationship with the other.

As Musetto suggests "Psychological parents recognize the importance of affirming their children's intrinsic loyalty ties to both parents, they encourage as positive contact as possible with the (other) parent. They do not use their children to further their own aims; to seek revenge on the other parent; to justify their own position; to serve as a mediator between parents" (Musetto, 1978, p. 63).

Communication and Contact with Child Care Settings

If the child's life space with either parent involves substitute care, the consultant can expand the mesosystem interviews to include the following issues: How did the parent select the child care setting? If the decision was made prior to separation what efforts were made to provide continuity of care? Which parent made the choice? Was more than one setting considered? What issues determined the choice? If financial consideration dictated the decision, how conscious was the parent of the quality of the setting and what attempts were made to improve the type of care available?

The child's transition into substitute care, as with visitation between parents, will affect the quality of experience in that setting. Weinraub and Lewis (1977) reported that distress in pre-school children was significantly correlated with how the parent prepared the child for his or her absence. It is useful, therefore, to ascertain how the parent prepared the child for entry into child care settings. Was the child accompanied during transition and how did the parent ascertain the child's subsequent adjustment to the setting?

Regarding communication and consensus between settings, Bronfenbrenner (1979) notes that the developmental potential of participation in multiple settings will vary directly with the ease and extent of two-way communication between those settings that encourages growth of mutual trust, goal consensus and the balance of power responsive to action on behalf of the developing child. Therefore, the mesosystem interview should cover how frequently the parent is in contact with the other settings that contain the developing child. Does the parent know the caretakers who are responsible for his or her child? Can the parent, for example, identify the caretaker's name, particular personal characteristics, and how the

child responds to those characteristics?

Regarding the degree of consensus between settings it is useful to establish to what extent the parent has communicated the child's developmental status, interests, schedules and goals to substitute caretakers. To what extent has the parent ascertained that his or her goals for the child are being pursued in the alternate setting? Does the parent know what the child does and with whom in that setting? Can the parent correctly assess any concerns that the caretakers may have about the child? Is the parent aware of developmental gains that were mastered in the child care setting? Does he or she follow through with similar learning experiences in the home setting? Conversely, does the parent communicate developmental gains mastered at home to the childcare setting?

Substantiation of this information can be obtained through interviews with substitute caretakers in each setting. Childcare personnel who are not related to either parent are often the only truly objective source available to the consultant in a case involving a pre-school child. Such interviews not only substantiate information obtained from the parent, but can also shed light on the quality and consistency of the parent's level of contact, communication and availability. Issues that are specific to this interview include: Whether the caretaker was informed of the parental separation, and by whom. What effort, if any, did each parent make to determine effects of separation that may have been observed in the childcare setting? If effects were reported, did the parent respond to feedback about the child's reactions, and able to seek direction in assisting the child? Has the parental conflict been allowed to intrude upon the child's experience in the substitute care setting and, if so, what role has each parent played in such intrusions?

In this area of the assessment plan, the consultant's overall task is to determine the quality and relative strength of the links between settings that contain the developing child. Information obtained from substitute caretakers can add immeasurably to the depth and objectivity of the consultant's work, and should be pursued whenever possible.

The mesosystem evaluation requires all of the consultant's clinical interviewing skills. The issues involved are subtle and not easily observed. Nonetheless, the quality of communication between settings has the potential to profoundly affect the child's development. Material obtained in mesosystem interviews and observations extends beyond the traditional isolated focus on the parent-child interaction. The breadth of this model becomes critically important in cases where the microsystem assessment has been inconclusive, and is invaluable as a secondary source of information in any dispute that requires a decision of such overwhelming magnitude.

EVALUATING THE EXOSYSTEM OR SETTINGS OF INDIRECT INFLUENCE

The last area of the consultant's map is the exosystem, or settings and social factors that indirectly shape the child's experience in the microsystem. When a divorce occurs, the child's exosystem is typically characterized by a series of environmental changes and alterations in support systems that include loss of income, new residence, new social patterns and new employment for one or both parents (Colletta, 1979; Desimone-Luis, O'Mahoney, & Hunt, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). In most cases, parents have minimal control over these exosystem changes, nor can changes per se serve as a basis for evaluation. The consultant must extend the assessment beyond the mere existence of disruption and instability to the question of how each parent structures

alternations in the exosystem and mediates their effects on the experience of the developing child.

Income Loss and Maternal Employment

Loss of income has been consistently correlated with divorce for the female parent (Bane, 1976; Colletta, 1979; Desimone-Luis, O'Mahoney, & Hunt, 1979). Herzog and Sudia (1973) speculated that income loss, hopelessly confounded with father absence, may account for much of the reported turmoil and decreased adequacy of parenting. For purposes of a custody evaluation, however, income loss tends to be a catch-all variable of little value. It is the associated effects of income loss that must be the subject of the consultant's assessment.

From the child's perspective, one of the effects of income loss is frequently the new and disturbing experience of having two full-time working parents. Hetherington et al. (1978) reported that, if the divorced woman had always worked, there was no relationship between maternal employment and emotional disturbance in the child. However, if the mother began to work around the time of the divorce, the child seemed to experience traumatically the double loss of both parents and showed a high incidence of conduct disturbance and emotional problems. This is a difficult issue for the consultant to assess, since entry into the job market is probably a necessity and not a choice. From the point of view of childrens' long-term adjustment and maternal employment, Skard (1972) reported that children of working mothers may have difficulty starting school, but subsequently do better than children of non-working mothers. It is possible that the finding of negative short-term adjustment may be due to the working parent's inattention to the child's needs in the mesosystem transition, rather than employment per se. Santrock and Warshak (1979) reported that contact with

substitute caretakers in children of divorced working parents was positively related to the child's social adjustment. McKinnon, Brody, and Stoneman (1982) found that working divorced mothers tend to use less stereotypic (i.e., more androgynous) sex typing with their pre-school children. Kurdek (1981) suggests that the development of androgynous characteristics in children may help to alleviate their stress and sense of helplessness associated with the loss of one parent who performed sex role specific behaviors about which the remaining parent knows very little. This evidence suggests that maternal employment per se is not predictive of the child's adjustment. The issue may be more usefully assessed in terms of how the parent constructs the child's immediate experience of this major exosystem change.

One intriguing issue that can be of value to the consultant is the degree to which each parent communicates with the child about exosystem changes. As noted in the microsystem evaluation section, the degree to which the child understands divorce and the physical absence of one parent is correlated with the child's adjustment. It is expected that the same would apply to other exosystem changes. The exosystem interview with the parent could include a version of Jacobson's (1978:III) parent-child communication schedule expanded to include other anticipated exosystem changes such as a new job, new schedules and new activities in the parents life. Mesosystem guidelines can be introduced into the exosystem evaluation to assess the parents' choice of child care, handling of the child's transition and contact with the child and his caretakers.

With regard to the job setting itself, the consultant must determine the degree of flexibility that each parent has to respond to the unpredictable demands of single parenting. In a study of support systems for families of young children Cochran and Bronfenbrenner (1978) reported that the most pervasive source of stress was found in conditions at work, in

particular, working hours and required over-time on evenings and weekends. In instances where job flexibility was present it was identified by parents as a source of support second only to the availability of satisfactory child care arrangements. The consultant must be particularly alert to this issue in cases where: The parent lacks other sources of support; the probability for improved flexibility in the future is minimal, or when income loss or lack of social support is so severe that adequate child care arrangements cannot be made when work responsibilities must override the tasks of parenting.

Support Systems

Loss of support, experienced by the parent in exosystem settings, have the potential to severely affect the pre-school child. Hetherington et al. (1978) describe the divorced mothers of pre-school children as overwhelmed by the sheer number of tasks confronting them. Mothers felt that they had neither the time, nor the energy, to deal competently with routine financial tasks, household maintenance, child care, and occupational and social demands. These overwhelming burdens were reflected in real discontinuities in routines that are considered critical to the well-being and emotional security of the pre-school child. McKinnon et al. (1982) reported that divorced mothers are less able to provide stimulating home environments for pre-school children. The researchers specifically attributed this finding to the divorced mothers' multiplicity of roles and responsibilities that were no longer shared. Conversely, the support of relatives, friends and professional agencies has been found to mediate the effects of divorce for the parent (Hetherington, et al., 1978; Kurdek, 1981; Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980). However,

what is at issue for the consultant is whether the parents' access to and utilization of support systems mitigates the effects of divorce for the child.

In a study of the correlates of children's long-term adjustment to divorce Kurdek et al. (1981) report a negative relationship between children's divorce adjustment and the custodial parents' personal competence. In a second article Kurdek (1981) notes that there is no direct evidence that the availability or use of support systems for parents is beneficial to the child. Hetherington et al., concur, reporting that both mothers and fathers in their pre-school sample increased social activity that served to bolster parental self-esteem, but resulted in even less time for the parent-child relationship. With regard to the church as a source of support to the parent, McDermott (1978) reported that heavily reliance on religious dogma could mask parental inability to tolerate spontaneous and automous thinking in the child, even though it was perceived as a source of support for the parent.

On the other hand support systems that specifically enhance the performance of the parental role and ameliorate the stress of multiple responsibilities in the family such as: child care; help with transportation; good relationships with neighbors; supportive flexible work environments or opportunities to vent or seek advice from relatives, friends or structured support groups have been shown to increase parenting effectiveness and positive outcomes in children (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978; Santrock & Warshak, 1979; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1980).

Research evidence in this area highlights, with unusual specificity, the drawbacks associated with evaluating exosystem factors in isolated, non-interactive terms. Clearly, as in all other areas of the evaluation, the consultant must assess the quality of the exosystem in terms of its

effects upon the child's experience in each developmental context. Lines between exosystem factors and the observed characteristics of the microsystem must be carefully and explicitly drawn.

Concluding Remarks

At this point in the assessment process, the consultant has compiled a hierarchy of data upon which to base his or her recommendation. The most critical information is derived from microsystem observation and interviews. This is the area of the child's life space that is experienced most directly and most profoundly shapes his development. Factors of the microsystem must be evaluated in terms of their interaction with the developing child. Similarly, the significance of meso- and exosystem variables cannot be determined in isolation, but in terms of their potential influence upon the experience of the developing child in this most immediate developmental context.

In some cases, the microsystem assessment of each parent-child relationship and its context will produce clear differences in parental competence. In such cases an evaluation of the meso- and exosystem can be abbreviated but should not be eliminated, for several reasons. First, the relative significance of the multiplicity of change factors involved in divorce remains unclear. Until social science research produces a more definite arrangement of the factors that count, it behooves the consultant to become acquainted with every facet of the issue. Secondly, knowledge of indirect developmental influences outside of the child's immediate life space can sharpen the consultant's evaluation of the microsystem, highlighting areas that may otherwise go unnoticed. Thirdly, the meso- and exosystem are most likely to reflect future environmental changes that the consultant must account for in the assessment of long-term

outcomes. Finally, it will be recalled that the integration of theoretical and empirical knowledge into an assessment model is designed not only to guide the consultant but to create an intelligent impact upon the outcome of a custody dispute. The consultant who focuses only on the parent-child interaction will be unprepared to address the effects of other environmental factors raised by attorneys in the litigation process. In many cases, the initial microsystem assessment will suggest that both parents are of equal competence, in which case the expanded breadth of an ecological model is a source of secondary information that may shed light on more subtle differences in each of the competing developmental contexts.

It is recognized, nonetheless, that the assessment plan presented here is extensive and time consuming. It may not be feasible for the consultant to cover all aspects in any real depth. It is hoped, however, that the presentation of a systematic model, based on research evidence and thoeretical knowledge, will suggest to behavioral scientists the vital necessity of bringing academic knowledge as well as clinical skill to the development of defensible criteria for determining the "best interests" of young children in cases of disputed custody.

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